THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 24

THE MEANING OF SACRAMENTS

By CHARLES HARRIS, D.D.

Rector of Colwall,
Examining Chaplain to
the Bishop of Llandaff

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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The Meaning of Sacraments

THE word 'sacrament' does not occur in the New Testament, and therefore before we begin our discussion it will be well to define its meaning.

A sacrament, according to Catholic teaching, is not a bare sign or symbol of grace (as it is in many Protestant systems), but rather an efficacious sign, that is to say, a sign which actually effects or conveys the grace of which it is a sign, provided that the proper conditions are observed. Thus *Baptism* and *Penance* actually confer remission of sins, if the recipient is duly penitent. The *Eucharist*, if duly consecrated, and received by a Christian in a state of grace, is an effectual means of spiritually feeding upon Christ. *Confirmation* confers, through the laying on of the bishop's hands, a further strengthening gift to the baptized. Through the sacrament of *Orders*, the Holy Spirit is given for the work of the ministry. The sacrament of *Matrimony* enables married Christians to fulfil the duties of family life. *Holy Unction* confers upon the sick and dying graces suitable to their condition, including in many cases actual healing.

What are Sacraments?

Sacraments, though ministered and received by men, are acts of God. As covenanted channels of divine grace they always proffer the gift which they symbolize, and even when (owing to the impenitence or unbelief of the recipients) they are unable actually to confer it, they always produce some effect. Thus, according to St. Paul's teaching, an unworthy communicant 'eateth and drinketh judgement unto himself,' and is 'guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' (1 *Cor.* xi. 23–30).

Probably the best general definition of a sacrament is the familiar one given in the Anglican catechism—'An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, ordained by Christ himself [directly, or mediately through his apostles], as a means whereby we receive the same [grace], and a pledge to assure us thereof.'

The ancient Fathers use the term 'sacrament' or 'mystery' in a wide sense, which includes not only the sacraments proper, but also a large number of other symbolical rites and ceremonies. No definition determining the precise number of the sacraments has been put forth by any of the seven Ecumenical Councils recognized by the undivided Church. Nevertheless, for many ages past, there has been general agreement both in the Eastern and Western Churches, that the term 'sacrament' or 'mystery,' in its narrower and stricter sense, ought to be confined

to the seven rites enumerated above, for these alone have by divine appointment a special grace attached to them.

The sacraments differ considerably from one another in dignity and importance. The Church of Rome anathematizes those who deny this, and the Anglican catechism singles out the two great sacraments of Baptism and the Supper of the Lord as 'generally necessary to salvation.'

A REMARKABLE change of opinion has lately set in among Protestant critics as to what the teaching of the New Testament really is on the subject of the sacraments. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the bulk of non-Catholic critics were firmly convinced that high sacramental doctrine is unscriptural, and that if the apostles were not actual Zwinglians, denying sacramental grace altogether, at any rate they did not advance beyond the ambiguous and mediating position of Calvin. Especially did it seem evident to them that there is no scriptural authority for the Catholic doctrine of the real objective presence of Christ's humanity in the Eucharist. Some contended for a merely 'figurative' presence (equivalent to a real absence); others for a 'virtual' presence, that is, a presence (to the believing

communicant only) of the 'virtue' of Christ's sacrificed body and blood; others for 'receptionism,' that is, a presence of Christ's body and blood not objectively in the sacrament, but in the soul of the worthy communicant.

The present tendency, however, of Protestant criticism both in England and Germany is to admit that the essentials of Catholic sacramental doctrine are already present in the New Testament, and that the later patristic developments have here their root, and to a large extent their justification. Prof. Harnack expresses the new view with a considerable degree of caution, nevertheless he says, 'Catholicism is as old as the Church if we include its rudimentary forms; there is hardly a single one of its elements which was not present' (*The Constitution and Law of the Church*, E.T., p. 253). Prof. Kirsopp Lake, who speaks for a large body of English Liberal opinion, says much more trenchantly: 'The Catholic doctrine [of the sacraments] is much more nearly primitive than the Protestant . . . Baptism is for Paul and his readers universally and unquestioningly accepted as a 'mystery' or sacrament, which works *ex opere operato*: and from the unhesitating manner in which St. Paul uses this fact as a basis for argument, as if it were a point on which Christian opinion did not vary, it would seem as though this sacramental teaching is central in the primitive Christianity to

which the Roman Empire began to be converted.' Similarly, speaking of the Eucharist Prof. Lake says: '[St. Paul] clearly means that the Corinthians know quite well that the Eucharist is a rite which really conveys what the heathen erroneously thought to obtain in their sacrificial meals—that is, participation in the divine nature' (*The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 213, 215, 385).

The same tendency may be seen in several recent works representative of orthodox Nonconformity. For instance, in *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments*, by Dr. P. T. Forsyth and Dr. Andrews, the latter writes (p. 159): 'We are forced to admit that, as far as exegesis is concerned, the sacramentarian [i.e. high sacramental] interpretation [of the New Testament] has won a decisive victory, and the symbolical school has been driven off the field. There can be no doubt whatever that Baptism and the Eucharist stood for far more in the life of the apostolic Church than they do in the estimation of the bulk of the members of the Free Churches to-day. The evidence seems to me . . . to amount almost to demonstrative proof.'

That the Catholic conception of the sacraments prevailed in the early as well as in the later patristic period, may be regarded as well established since the vindication by Lightfoot (in A.D. 1885) of the genuineness of the epistles of St. Ignatius. To Ignatius, whose letters date

from about A.D. 105 to 110, the sacraments are already divinely appointed and essential means of grace in the full sense of later orthodoxy. The Eucharist is 'the medicine of immortality, the antidote [against sin] that we should not die, but live for ever in Jesus Christ' (*To the Ephesians*, xx.). He blames the Gnostic heretics who 'abstain from Eucharist and prayer, because they confess not that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ—that flesh which suffered for our sins, and which the Father raised up by his goodness' (*To the Smyrnaeans*, vii.). The imprisoned martyr exclaims, 'I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ . . . and for drink I desire his blood, which is incorruptible love' (*To the Romans*, vii.). That he held the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice is evident, for he calls the place where it is celebrated the 'altar,' or 'place of sacrifice,' employing the same term which in the Greek Old Testament denotes the altar of burnt-offering.

THE fundamental objection to the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments is that it is unspiritual, and materialistic in tendency. To many persons—even to some who are genuine believers in the Incarnation—it seems incredible that God, who is Spirit, should communicate his highest spiritual gifts

to men through the instrumentality of material signs (such as water and bread and wine), and of visible acts (such as the imposition of hands).

We may reply that the principle of sacramental grace is supported (1) by the analogy of nature, for there is (as we shall show) a natural sacramental system inherent in nature itself, and (2) by the principle of the Incarnation, which (as we shall also show) is itself a sacrament, and the basis and life-giving principle of the special Christian sacraments.

Arguing from the analogy of nature, we may contend that nature is a system in which the material ministers to the spiritual in a manner that may fairly be called sacramental. Matter is not alien from spirit, much less hostile to it, as the ancient Gnostics and Manichees imagined, but is its natural complement, organ, and instrument. Whatever may be the case with angels, it is certain that beings like men, compounded of matter and spirit, are dependent upon matter for the due exercise of their spiritual powers. Thus the brain is the organ of thought, the tongue of speech, the hand of external activity. No one who duly considers the effect upon the mind of a blow on the head, of brain-disease, or even of headache, or how greatly physical fatigue hinders prayer, is likely to doubt that the condition of the body may help or hinder thought, and even devotion.

10 Are Sacraments Unspiritual?

The secular equivalent of 'grace' is the spiritual influence of one human soul upon another; and who can doubt that in practically all cases this influence is mediated through the body, that is, through matter? The face expresses the emotions (love, hatred, fear, disappointment, hope, despair, rapture, and the like): and, by expressing them, sacramentally influences other souls. The kiss is a sacrament of love, and hand-shaking of friendship. Each by expressing the emotion which it symbolizes, strengthens it in both parties. An orator influences his audience by the expression of his face, by his gestures, and by his words. Even the last are material, for words, as spoken, are nothing but aerial vibrations set in motion by the material tongue and received by the material ear. Speech, admittedly the most spiritual of ordinary means of influencing other minds, involves in all cases the use of the body. Even the mind's most abstract thinking is usually conducted by the help of material imagery. Even algebra has its letters and symbols, and logic its diagrams. 'Imageless' thinking is undoubtedly possible, and to some extent in use, but as a rule the mind apprehends the abstract and spiritual through the medium of the concrete and material.

In a similar way the fine arts, which ought undoubtedly to be ranked among the great spiritual forces of civilization, can only

become actual by finding outward expression in matter. The painter influences other minds through the material picture, the architect through the material building, the musician through material sounds, the poet through the printed page or through spoken words. In all these cases a real spiritual influence (or 'grace') passes from soul to soul. There is a real spiritual transaction, but the medium of communication is material.

But the most impressive of all natural analogies with the sacramental principle is that afforded by the mystery, or sacrament, of human generation. God's greatest gift to man, the gift of life itself, is sacramentally mediated through matter, namely through the sexual union of two human bodies. If, therefore, the very origin of the human soul is thus mediated through matter, it is altogether unreasonable to maintain that the subsequent spiritual gifts which the soul receives (such as regeneration, absolution, spiritual nourishment, and the unction of the Holy Ghost) cannot also be mediated through matter. As Dr. Gore rightly remarks, 'The dependence of the immortal spirit—the only seat of human spirituality—upon material conditions, at its origin and throughout its existence on earth, is the most convincing refutation of a great deal of language used in repudiation of the sacramental principle' (*The Body of Christ*, p. 37).

Such natural analogies as these go far to justify the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the sacraments; but by general consent it is the incarnation of God which most fully illustrates and supports the sacramental principle.

The Son of God became incarnate for three main purposes: (1) to reveal the invisible Godhead, (2) to atone for sin, and (3) to unite men to God. All Christians (including Protestant Christians) believe that since the Incarnation God's spiritual action upon the human race has been mainly mediated through the humanity (which includes the human body) of his incarnate Son. But this is, in effect, to admit that the Incarnation is a sacrament—is, in fact, the one and only fundamental sacrament of the Christian religion. There is no need here to prove at length, because it is self-evident, that the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are entirely dependent upon, and derive all their spiritual efficacy from, the Incarnation.

THE charge of superstition so frequently brought against the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments, is based very largely upon misunderstanding. The emphasis with which Catholic theologians insist that the reality of the sacraments is not dependent

upon the faith or moral disposition of the minister or of the recipient, but that sacramental grace is objectively offered to bad and good alike, has been misunderstood to mean that all recipients of the sacraments, whatever their spiritual condition, receive the same grace.

This, however, is almost the precise opposite of what the Church really teaches. According to her teaching, although in every sacrament the same grace is always objectively offered, it is by no means always subjectively received, because the unworthiness of the recipient constitutes a barrier (complete or partial, according to its degree) to the reception of the grace of the sacrament. For example, it is clear from Holy Scripture that neither did Simon Magus receive the grace of Baptism and Confirmation, nor the unworthy communicants at Corinth the grace of spiritual feeding upon Christ. Nevertheless, every sacrament, as being an act of God, always produces some effect, even when it is sacrilegiously received. St. Peter declared that Simon Magus was 'in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity,' and St. Paul pronounced that the unworthy communicants at Corinth were 'guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,' and received, not spiritual refreshment and sustenance, but 'judgement' to themselves.

The difference between sacraments and charms is that the former are moral, the latter

magical or mechanical means of grace. Sacraments produce wholesome effects only in those who receive them worthily. Charms are supposed to produce their magical effect on all persons alike, regardless of their moral character.

Much has lately been said by anthropologists, and even by theologians, concerning a supposed close affinity (or even identity of principle) between the Christian sacraments and the heathen mysteries. The resemblance, however, is little more than superficial. In essence the mysteries were charms rather than sacraments. True, they promised fellowship with the gods and a blessed immortality to those whom the priests initiated, but initiation was offered to all, even to the worst characters, such as prostitutes and brothel-keepers.

On the other hand, it is the uniform teaching of Catholic theologians, (1) that unworthy recipients of the sacraments receive no spiritual advantage thereby ; and (2) that they further incur the guilt of sacrilege.

The most plausible objection to the Catholic theory of the sacraments is derived from the existence of certain Christian bodies (for instance, the Friends and the Salvationists), who reject the use of sacraments altogether, and who yet exhibit, often in a notable degree, certain characteristically Christian virtues, such as charity to the poor, and zeal for souls.

The full treatment of this difficulty would require a volume. We have only space here for a few suggestions.

(1) Although the sacraments are God's covenanted channels of grace, yet he is not confined to them, and can confer grace in other ways on those who diligently seek him, provided that their non-use of the sacraments is due to ignorance, not to pride or wilfulness.

(2) The bodies which entirely reject the sacraments are very small, from which we may gather that though religion without sacraments seems to appeal to a certain limited class of minds, sacramental religion makes a much more successful appeal to ordinary human nature.

(3) Although it is undeniable that saintly lives are lived by God's grace beyond the visible fellowship of the Catholic Church (though not, as a rule, beyond the range of the sacrament of baptism), yet the richer, fuller, and more varied types of saintliness, which are illustrated in such profusion in the various calendars of Catholic Christendom, seem to indicate that the Church is after all the true home of saintliness, and that though God answers faithful prayer wherever it is offered, it is only within the actual fellowship of the Catholic Church, and through devout participation in its sacraments, that the fullness of God's grace can normally be received.

SOME BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

B. P. Bull. THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE.

C. Gore. THE BODY OF CHRIST (especially chap. I).

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